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SUBJECT: QATARIS DEBATE FOREIGN LABOR ON BBC

KEY POINTS

-- Two former Qatari cabinet ministers debated the treatment of foreign laborers at the "Doha Debates," a Qatar Foundation program broadcast on BBC World. At question was the motion, "This house believes that Gulf Arabs value profits over people."

-- Several Gulf Arab audience participants wondered why the debaters and questioners were focused on foreign laborers, when Gulf citizens are well looked after by the state, and governments are making serious efforts to improve conditions for laborers.

-- Others argued that Gulf development had come at the laborers' expense; at one point, the moderator quoted the annual Trafficking In Persons report to provoke a response from one of the Qatari debaters.

-- According to the Doha Debates organizers, this was the first time in its four-year history that Qataris faced off in a debate on the program. It will be aired on BBC World on 11/22 and 11/23.

COMMENTS

-- (SBU) Judging from audience members' reactions, this was easily the most emotionally charged "Doha Debate" in at least a year. For example, as the moderator tried to steer questions away from foreign labor and "back to the issue at hand," one western audience member shouted, "but foreign labor exploitation IS the issue!"

-- (SBU) Young Qatari men and women that PAO spoke with after the debate expressed disappointment with some of their Gulf Arab colleagues in the audience, noting "they just don't see foreign laborers as people, that's the whole problem."

-- (SBU) The motion, voted on by the audience, was approved by 75 to 25 percent. The Qatari on the losing side told the DCM later that night, "when they brought up foreign labor, and with an audience of many foreigners and few Qataris, our side was doomed."

An Unprecedented Debate

1. (U) In what its organizers said was a major milestone, two former Qatari cabinet ministers squared off during a November 17 session of the "Doha Debates," a joint project of the BBC and Qatar Foundation, which is filmed nine times a year in Doha and aired on BBC World. Former Justice Minister Dr. Najib Al Nuaimi and former Economy Minister Sheikh Mohamed Ahmed Al Thani, joined respectively by the Chief Editor of Bahrain's "Al Wasat" newspaper, Dr. Mansoor Al Jamri, and the Dean of the Dubai School of Government, Dr. Tarik Youssef, debated the motion, "This house believes that Gulf Arabs value profits over people."

2. (U) Arguing in favor of the motion, Dr. Nuaimi observed that, despite the region's spectacular economic growth in recent years,

there was still poverty in the Gulf. He cited a case he knew of three Qatari families living in one house; he also mentioned the case of an elderly man living on a pension, trying to support his divorced daughter on a monthly income of QR 2900 (USD 800). "After he pays the driver, he has only half his pension to live on," he said.

¶3. (U) Sheikh Mohammed, arguing against the motion, noted that Gulf governments had spent more than 350 billion on education and health care over the past several years; life expectancy for citizens had risen measurably; and Education City -- where the debate was taking place -- was a perfect example of the Qatari Government's commitment to providing its citizens with world-class opportunities.

Foreign Labor

¶4. (U) Moderator Tim Sebastian, quoting the State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons report, said treatment of migrant workers in Gulf states was an "international scandal," to which Sheikh Mohammed replied by saying that he had never seen the report. There were a few "isolated cases" of abuse, he said, but the Government was serious about cracking down on companies abusing their workers.

¶5. (U) Sheikh Mohammed informed the audience that concerned embassies approved the terms of each contract for foreign workers, and that the Ministry of Labor and National Human Rights Committee monitored and reported on abuses. He also said that workers were sometimes taken advantage of by unscrupulous agents in their home countries.

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¶6. (U) Three young men and one woman in the audience from Qatar, Kuwait and Yemen said that they thought Gulf governments were taking good care of their citizens by providing excellent education, health care and other social services. One Qatari man said, "Why are you bringing up foreign labor? Why are you seeing the glass as half empty; Qataris are well taken care of, and this is what should be focused on."

¶7. (U) Other audience members argued that Gulf economic development had come at the expense of foreign workers. Asked one Egyptian student, "Have you seen the conditions these people live in?" A Qatari woman asked why the Government did not help take care of foreign laborers and instead expected the private sector to house, feed and provide health care for their workers.

¶8. (U) An audience member from Lebanon asked why the Qatari Government did not allow workers easily to change their sponsorship from one company to another. Sheikh Mohammed responded by saying that Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani had promised to "ease that problem" soon.

LEBARON